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SUBJECT: IRAN AND AOUN: THINKING ALIKE, ACCORDING TO
CHARLES RIZK

REF: A. BEIRUT 1184

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1186

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S) Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, his presidential aspirant's heart beating faster than ever, told the Ambassador over an 8/8 lunch that he was delighted to receive Iranian Ambassador Mohammed Rida Chibani two days earlier. Chibani, who boycotts the Siniora cabinet in solidarity with Hizballah, told Rizk that U.S.-Iranian talks, while nascent, were serious and would affect Lebanon. The U.S. military commitment to the Gulf Sunnis was intended merely to distract the Arabs from what was really going on in terms of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. On the presidency, Chibani encouraged Rizk to keep in close touch with Parliament Speaker Berri. A day later, Rizk visited MP Michel Aoun, who explained why he and Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah had grown so close. Lebanon's Maronites and Lebanon's Shia are alike, with a love for the land that the Sunnis, foreigners and extremists, will never understand. While Aoun had a temporary relationship with the Syrian regime as a bulwark against the Sunnis, Aoun counted on a long-term strategic relationship with Iran and Hizballah. While vague on the details, he hoped to announce a second-generation "understanding" document with Hizballah soon. Aoun told Rizk that, with the USG and Iran now in dialogue, Hizballah and Aoun would remain the dominant forces in Lebanon. While noting striking similarities in the points made by Chibani and Aoun, Rizk marveled at the unabashed racist terms Aoun used to describe the Sunnis as well as Aoun's refusal to absorb the lessons of his narrow margin in Sunday's parliamentary by-elections (reftels). End summary.

BREAKING CABINET BOYCOTT, IRAN'S AMBASSADOR
REACHES OUT TO, AND PRAISES, RIZK

[1](#)2. (S) Over lunch with the Ambassador on 8/8, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk read from notes he had written immediately after a call on him by Iranian Ambassador Mohammed Rida Chibani on 8/6. Rizk found Chibani's request for a meeting significant, given that Chibani has boycotted the Siniora cabinet (while continuing to meet regularly with President Emile Lahoud) ever since the 11/11/06 cabinet walk-out by the Shia ministers. Chibani opened the meeting by praising Rizk as "different, better, wiser," than his

cabinet colleagues, someone with whom Iran can work.
(Comment: While the bemused Rizk is clever enough to have seen through the charm offensive, he is also sufficiently vain and ambitious to allow himself to succumb in part. End comment.) Rizk made small talk about the previous day's Metn election, but Chibani did not offer substantive views.

IRANIAN MESSAGE: U.S.-IRANIAN TALKS
SERIOUS, WILL HAVE IMPACT ON LEBANON

13. (S) Chibani then opened the subject that Rizk assumes prompted the meeting in the first place: the U.S.-Iranian dialogue. According to Rizk, Chibani explained that Iraq had brought the U.S. and Iran together more closely than in decades. The USG now recognized that dealing with Iran was inescapable. While bilateral talks were in their nascent stage only, with many differences between the two countries, the dialogue would grow to encompass not only Iraq but security in the Gulf and Lebanon. This is a positive development, for the USG now recognizes Iran's regional role. And Iran recognizes that, however much it may appreciate its warming relations with France, it must deal directly with the U.S. For Lebanon's stability, this is good news, Chibani told Rizk. "I got the sense that, in a strange way, this guy's actually pro-American," Rizk said. Rizk also said that he had the impression that Chibani was fairly dismissive of Syria, considering it as a minor player.

U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO THE ARABS:
TO DISTRACT THEM FROM U.S.-IRAN TALKS

14. (S) Rizk asked why, if the trend lines were positive for
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the U.S.-Iranian relationship, the USG had just announced a USD 20-billion security commitment to its moderate Arab allies. Chibani, gesturing to a bowl of sweets on Rizk's coffee table, said that the announcement was mere chocolate, something to make the Sunnis happy and distract them. While the Gulf Arabs are busily unwrapping and eating their U.S.-provided candies, the U.S. and Iran, out of necessity rather than love, will be building a new partnership. (The Ambassador refuted Chibani's interpretation.) Rizk said that Chibani then tried to explain Iran's nuclear policies, but Rizk stopped the discussion, saying that he was not well-informed enough to comment. Chibani then went into a long explanation about how much Lebanon's Christians and Shia have in common, and why Iran is so interested in offering protection to both from the growing threat of Sunni extremism and ambition.

ADVISE TO RIZK: KEEP IN TOUCH
WITH BERRI ON PRESIDENCY

15. (S) Rizk tried to engage Chibani on Iran's views of Lebanon's presidential elections, but Chibani did not take the bait. "He was noncommittal on Aoun," Rizk said, who toyed aloud inconclusively with whether that was good news or bad news for his own presidential hopes. Chibani counseled Rizk to stay in close touch with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri in the weeks leading up to presidential elections. Iran, Chibani said, trusts Berri's management of the presidential issue. Rizk found it curious that Chibani did not raise the issue of a national unity cabinet now, which is the demand of Hizballah and Amal. Ever the optimist, Rizk concluded that the Iranian visit was a harbinger of good things to come for his own presidential prospects.

AOUN COMPARES SHIA AND MARONITES

16. (S) The following day (8/7), Rizk spent two hours with MP Michel Aoun. Rizk said that he was struck by the

difference in tone but similarities in content between the underlying themes of Aoun's and Chibani's comments. Using "shockingly racist descriptions" that the more polished Chibani avoided, Aoun talked about Lebanon's Sunnis as "animals." His expressed distaste for the Syrian regime but explained that there is no choice but to work with the Alawites now in order to help protect Lebanon against the Sunnis. Syria should never be permitted to fall under Sunni rule, as the combination of Lebanese and Syrian Sunnis would drive out the Christians permanently.

¶7. (S) Much of the two-hour meeting, Rizk said, was devoted to Aoun's explanation of how close he has grown to Nasrallah.

In Rizk's view, Aoun wanted to leave the impression that he privately visits Nasrallah regularly, "whether that's true or not." According to Aoun, Nasrallah is a wise, moderate leader. Lebanon's Shia are salt-of-the-earth people like Lebanon's Maronites. The Maronites and Shia both love the land, and loving the land is the first step to loving the country. The Sunnis are foreigners, rootless, cosmopolitan, money-grubbing, and increasingly extremist. (Rizk acknowledged that Aoun seems to have adopted typically anti-Semitic tones to apply them to Sunnis rather than Jews.)

The Maronites and Shia, by bonding together, can withstand the Sunni threat, which is both internal (i.e., Hariri and Siniora-based) and external (i.e., Saudi).

A NEW AOUN-HIZBALLAH MOU?

¶8. (S) Aoun explained to Rizk and he and Nasrallah recognize each other's unique leadership role. That is why the MOU they signed on 2/6/06 remains strong. Rizk said that Aoun talked vaguely about a new understandings document that was being worked upon privately between representatives of the two men. In this document, Nasrallah would pledge to support secular initiatives such as civil (vice religious-based) marriages. The Sunnis, Aoun said, would never dare make such a proposal, and the differing approaches again shows how open-minded Nasrallah is to the Christians. (The Ambassador subsequently asked Aoun bloc MP Ibrahim Kanaan about a possible second-generation Aoun-Nasrallah MOU. "God forbid!" Kanaan exclaimed, in what seemed to be genuine shock. "We'll be finished!")

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U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS GUARANTEE FOR LEBANON, AND FOR AOUN PRESIDENCY

¶9. (S) Aoun then regaled Rizk with tales similar to those of the Iranian ambassador about the importance of the Iranian-U.S. dialogue. Claiming to have inside sources privy to the talks, Aoun said that these talks would provide protection for Lebanon's Christians and Shia from the external and internal Sunni threat. They also would help pave the way to an Aoun presidency, supported by Hizballah. Iran will help the U.S. understand the dangers of Sunni "arrogance." Hizballah and Aoun will remain strong through this dialogue; the Hariris will wither. When he and Nasrallah are together, Aoun revealed, both leaders prefer Iran to Syria, in part because distance makes good neighbors.

The Iranians, Aoun told Rizk, do not speak Arabic, are not Sunnis, and do not sit on Lebanon's borders. That makes both Nasrallah and Aoun more comfortable. Rizk said Aoun also seemed oblivious to the implications of the Metn elections, convinced despite the facts to the contrary that he still enjoys overwhelming Maronite support.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) Rizk is one of the brighter pupils in that overcrowded Lebanese school that teaches that Lebanon's presidency will be decided only if there is some kind of

external understanding that includes the U.S., France, Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. As (unusual for Lebanese) one who prefers thinking regionally than diving into the minutiae of Lebanese internal politics, he could hardly disguise his delight at having been contacted by the Iranian ambassador. (We wonder, in fact, if Chibani was indeed conducting a job interview, since Rizk's presidential aspirations are far from secret.) Try as we did to underscore the problems between

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the U.S. and Iran, we suspect Rizk was susceptible to Chibani's pitch that a U.S.-Iranian dialogue will affect Lebanon's future.

¶11. (S) Rizk will no doubt try to cultivate his new ambassadorial contact, while studiously avoiding doing anything to provoke our opposition to his presidential bid. We wonder if he will try to renew his once active, now suspended, direct contact with Nasrallah. In addition, we're sure that Rizk's call on Aoun was part of his strategy of positioning himself as everyone's fallback candidate, once it becomes clear that Aoun has no chance of ascending to Baabda Palace and that March 14 cannot advance its own candidate (assuming March 14 ever manages to focus on a single candidate). Unfortunately, the view from the Aounist camp has not yet cleared sufficiently for serious fallback talks to begin, and March 14 still hopes for its own victor (which, of course, would be our preferred outcome as well). But, if it comes down to compromise, given the choice between Rizk and the other so-called consensus candidates -- LAF Commander Sleiman, Central Bank Governor Salameh, happy-but-aging gourmand Michel Edde, etc. -- we'd pick Rizk. He proved his credentials by pushing through the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and refusing to resign from the cabinet, despite considerable pressure from his childhood friend Emile Lahoud. Alas, last we checked, we have no parliamentary vote in the matter.

¶12. (S) Finally, Rizk has expressed keen interest in going to Washington. He purportedly wants to discuss regional issues and how to move Lebanon forward in the years to come. But it is obvious that he sees a trip to Washington as a requisite audition for higher office. (He has also been prompted by UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen to have a coming-out tour.) He is an amusing, articulate, and intelligent -- if occasionally long-winded -- interlocutor, and, if Washington officials have time to receive him at a level that would include at least some brief cabinet-level exposure, we're all for it. But, as we've told Rizk repeatedly, he doesn't really need us: if he's serious about the presidency, he should concentrate on lining up parliamentary votes rather than on getting our external support. U.S. backing will come naturally by virtue of policies he would pursue as president, not because of the impression he makes now in Washington.

FELTMAN